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22 July 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Current Status of Chinese Roadbuilding Activity in Northwest Laos

1. Our best information on the current status of Chinese roadbuilding activity in northwest Laos is outlined below. Appended to this minute are two maps -- I and II -- which depict some of the points and places at issue.

2. The present terminus of the Chinese Communist road heading down the valley of the Nam Beng ("Nam" means "River") toward the Mekong is near a town called Muong Houn (Map I). Photography of [redacted] showed some trail clearing activity for about five kilometers beyond this terminal point along a line running roughly south of Muong Houn (Map II). This [redacted] photography was slightly ambiguous because the limit of the clearing activity happened to coincide with the limit of the area photographically covered.

3. The above is fact, what follows is speculation engendered by a certain anomaly in the above information. The clearing activity referred to follows a course that runs roughly south of Muong Houn. (See Map II.) This "clearing activity" consists of cutting a path through the forest and/or widening existing trails. The six kilometer cleared portion in question is not passable for motor vehicles at this time. The problem arises from the fact that its north/south alignment does not

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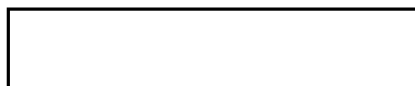
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follow what we had thought would be the alignment of the road proper extending on into Muong Houn and then towards Ban Nammao along a course parallel to the Nam Beng. (Again, Map II.) Thus we have the interpretation problem of whether this six kilometer stretch in which there is current activity is in fact preparation for extension of the road beyond Muong Houn or something else, such as the development of a storage area or access route thereto.

4. The evidence on the above point is not sufficiently clear cut or conclusive at present to support anything but a Scotch verdict of non proven. If this activity is part of an onward extension of the Nam Beng Valley road, rather than a spur or access route, then the Chinese engineers have decided not to build a bridge near the present end of construction to cross the Beng River and proceed into Muong Houn town. Instead, this hypothesis would suggest an onward alignment bypassing Muong Houn in favor of proceeding down the east bank of the river and crossing at some other point down stream, perhaps Ban Sibounhuang. Alternatively, the engineers could have decided to drop even further south to link up with the trail known (euphemistically) as Route 43, which joins the alignment (or extended alignment) of Route 46 at Ban Nammao.

5. Route 46 is the designator covering that portion of the road already completed from Muong Sai to just northeast of Muong Houn. It is now 50 percent gravel surfaced from Muong Sai to Muong Beng and 11 bridges are under construction between Muong Beng and Muong Houn. During the forthcoming dry season (October to March) the Chinese will probably finish improving the presently, or partially, constructed portions of the road and will probably also push on toward Pak Beng and the Mekong. To our eyes, the "Route 46," i. e., Nam Beng, alignment would seem the more logical one to follow. If so, current activity is some sort of ancillary endeavor, not preliminary work on a true extension. But the alternate alignments described above would save a lot of bridging and might have other local advantages not readily apparent on our maps. If the Chinese builders have so reasoned, then current activity could be a sign of work on a proper extension commenced without waiting for the rains to stop.

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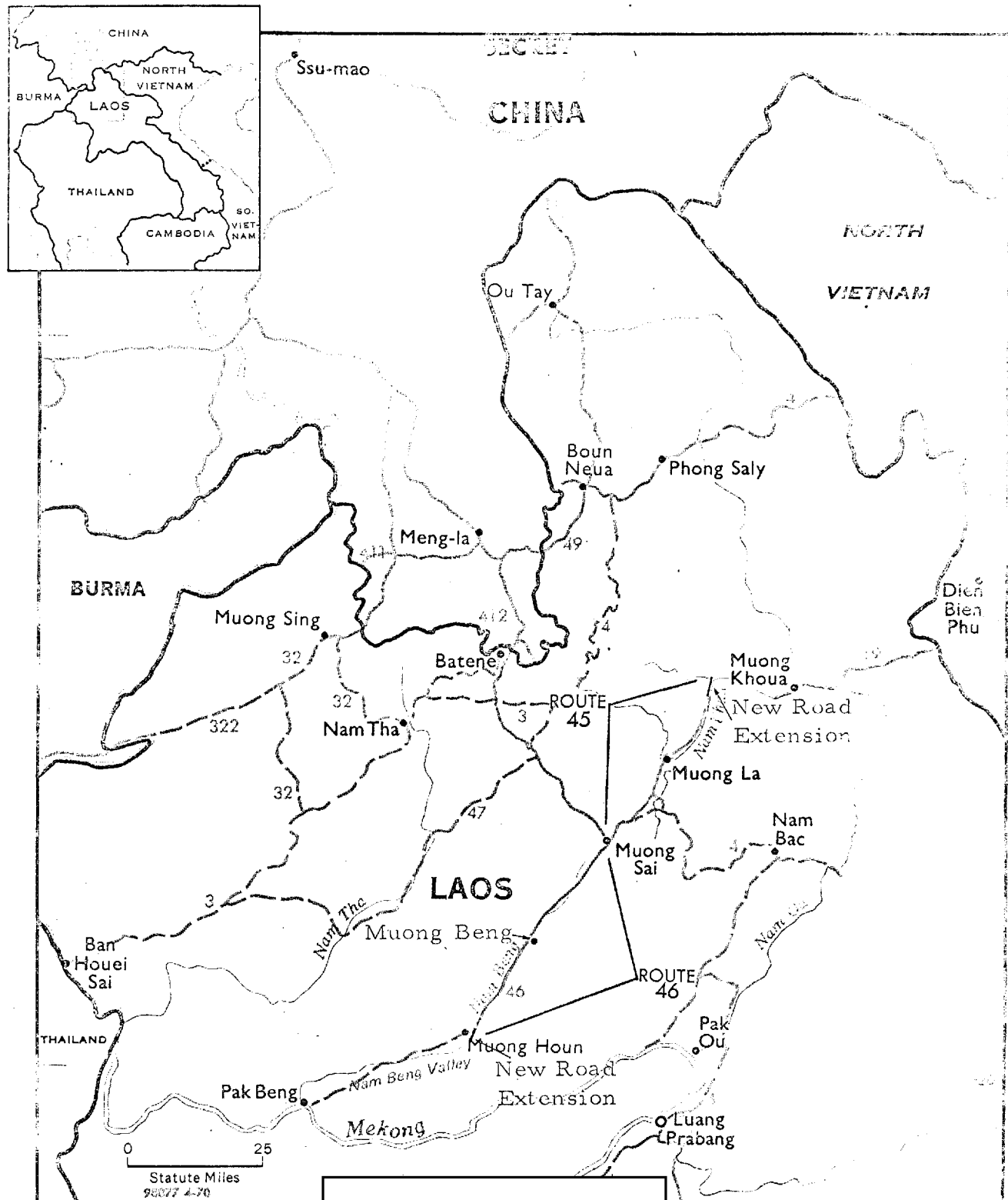


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Attachments

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